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## THE U.S. AND CENTRAL AMERICA

# U.S. considered raid on Salvador camp of rebels to respond to Marine deaths

By Robert Timberg  
Washington Bureau of The Sun

WASHINGTON — The Reagan administration considered a military raid on a guerrilla camp in El Salvador as a response to the killing of four U.S. marines and two other Americans in the capital city of San Salvador a month ago, a senior White House official said yesterday.

In confirming U.S. consideration of a military response against anti-government rebels in El Salvador, the official denied a report Wednesday that a training camp for Salvadoran guerrillas in Nicaragua was the target under study.

"There wasn't at the time a review of Nicaraguan targets," said the official, who spoke to a handful of reporters on condition he not be identified. "That said, we don't foreclose that. We just weren't doing that."

"To the contrary," he said, "we were more seized with whether the center of operations for the PRTC in Salvador could be identified" with sufficient confidence to justify military action.

PRTC is the Spanish acronym for the Central American Revolutionary Workers' Party, one of the smaller of the five guerrilla units of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front, or FMLN, the military arm of the Salvadoran revolutionary forces.

The PRTC, one of the more extreme FMLN units, claimed responsibility for gunning down the four Marines at a San Salvador restaurant June 20, but denied killing the nine civilians, including two Americans, also slain in the attack.

The official declined to say specifically why no raid materialized, but ascribed it to "a combination of factors." He hinted, however, at the prospect of innocent civilians becoming casualties and "some ambiguities" in U.S. intelligence.

Asked what standard the administration applied to assess the feasibility of the operation, he replied,

"You have to have high confidence in the identity, location and timeliness of the target — that who is there is going to be there when you hit it and nobody else is there."

On another matter, the official said the generally reserved U.S. reaction to the South African government's assumption of sweeping powers under a state of emergency declaration results in part from the fear that more overt efforts might backfire and lead to greater repression of blacks.

He said the administration views the government's declaration of a state of emergency and the resulting turmoil as "very worrisome . . . very serious."

Even so, he said, President Reagan believes that the controversial American policy of "constructive engagement" has paid important dividends for blacks and should be continued.

At the same time, the official said, the administration was wary of bringing public pressure to bear on the white minority South African government partly because such measures could result in even more repressive measures against blacks.

"I think the emotional impulse toward some sort of dramatic pressure ignores the fact that the instruments of power are very much in the government's favor and that its ability, which is historically proven, to become even more severe is very clear, and its ability and will to do so are very apparent," he said.

He added, "If your well-meaning efforts have the effect of leading the government to even more extreme positions, which history suggests it well could, you would have damaged black interests very badly. . . . The

South African government has shown time and again that it's really impervious to outside rhetoric or sanctions."

The official said that the South African government, headed by President P. W. Botha, had instituted some significant reforms, but that it was now caught between conservative whites who believe change has come too far too fast and the rising expectations of blacks unhappy with the pace. He said the Botha government could survive the current trouble, but declined to predict an early improvement in the situation.

Instead, he offered a gloomy assessment. "On those occasions in the past where analogous confrontations have occurred, matters have gotten worse before they get better," he said.

Regarding possible retaliation for the American deaths in San Salvador, the official refused to say if the plan of attack under consideration was a so-called surgical air strike at the guerrilla base. Such strikes are aimed at specific targets, with the hope of limiting both U.S. involvement and civilian casualties.

"There are alternative ways of going after that kind of target, and they're not limited to air attacks," he said.

The administration finally decided against military action and, once again, warned Nicaragua of "serious consequences" if it is linked to further attacks on Americans in Central America.

Explaining the need for still another warning to Nicaragua, the official said it was intended to remove any "illusion" that the administration's anti-terrorist pronouncements in the wake of the Beirut hostage crisis applied only to the Middle East.

He said the administration wanted to put the Sandinistas on notice that the United States is aware that Nicaragua supports terrorist groups and that if an "appropriate target" can be pinpointed, "we will act against it."

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